

EMPIRE: THE DEBATE

THE US BEYOND SYRIA: A RELUCTANT EMPIRE?

TRANSCRIPT – SEPTEMBER 2013

Marwan Bishara Voiceover (VO): To strike or not to strike?

Obama: "To respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike."

Assad: "Obama can draw lines for himself and for his country, not for other countries."

VO: The US, a massive military power, with a unique capacity to hit anywhere in the world.

Obama: "I believe America is exceptional."

VO: And issuing orders to other nations.

What does that make the United States?

Anne-Marie Slaughter: We're certainly not an empire [laughs].

Obama: The notion of American empire may be useful propaganda, but it isn't borne out by America's current policy or by public opinion

VO: What is the future for America?

Andrew Bacevich: We cannot acknowledge that we are nation shaped by history, rather than shaping history.

VO: After a decade of wars and occupations.

Confronted by poison gas attacks and more than one hundred thousand already dead in Syria Washington has reached out to Moscow.

Has a war-weary America become a reluctant global power?

Obama: "America is not the world's policeman."

Stephen Hadley: America's reluctance to play a role internationally is a mistake.

VO: And what does that mean for the rest of the world? I am Marwan Bishara, and this is **EMPIRE**.

*****PACKAGE*****

Obama (August 2012): "That's a red line for us, there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons."

Slaughter: The first protests start in March of 2011. They start because teenagers have been tortured for graffiti. At that point, people are marching across the Middle East and North Africa, the Syrians join.

They march for nine months more or less without firing back.

David Kilcullen: That society had already reached breaking point with respect to electricity, to water, to all those things that sustain life.

Slaughter: So they're getting killed in the streets. The regime is getting more and more violent.

Obama: "Assad lost legitimacy when he started firing on his own people."

Walid Muallem: "We are all hearing the drums of war around us."

John McCain: "Hezbollah poured in."

Putin: "Will we help Syria? We will."

Nassif Hitti (a senior Arab League official): "Take measures against the perpetrators of this crime."

Nabil Fahmy: "Egypt is against western military intervention."

Slaughter: "He released an awful lot of the jihadists he had in jail. He wanted this to be between him and violent extremists and he did everything he could to make that happen."

Assad: "80 to 90 percent of the rebels on the ground, or the terrorists, are al-Qaeda."

Slaughter: It's very cynical stuff.

Kilcullen: The foreign fighter flows into Syria completely dwarf any level of foreign fighter movement that we saw in Iraq.

Nusra fighter: "We are not affiliated with anyone inside or outside of Syria."

Abu Hasan (Jabhat al-Nusra): "If al-Qaeda works to establish law and justice among the people and spreads religion in the country, then we are with al-Qaeda."

McCain: They are not extremists and jihadists, and the Syrian people will reject extremists and jihadists.

Hisham Rama (Syrian National Council): "We are 100 percent sure that the Iranians are involved in killing civilians in Syria."

Vitaly Churkin: "I think some colleagues jumped to their conclusions."

Hong Lei: "China is deeply concerned about certain countries preparing for unilateral military actions."

James Gelvin: And then of course Obama made his ill-fated red line comments.

Obama: We start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus, that would change my equation.

John Kerry: "Our sense of basic humanity is offended."

John Boehner: "The use of these weapons have to be responded to."

Obama: "I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets."

CBS presenter: There is a new CBS-New York Times poll this morning that finds the vast majority of Americans, 61% oppose a US military strike on Syria.

Vox pop: "We got to take care of our own."

Syrian soldier: "What chemical weapons, there's been no proof."

Elderly Syrian man: "Syria is the only Arab nation resisting Western colonialism and Israel."

Press TV SOT: "Saudi Arabia says it will support the US military intervention in Syria."

Mark Jacobson: No matter what actions you take, there are going to be negative second order effects.

VO: No one denies that America has the ability to take action.

And that America can make that decision on its own.

The rest of the world can applaud, disparage, threaten, or whine, but no one can force the US to act and no one can stop it.

If one head of state can tell another head of state what he can do in his own country, what does that make the country that gives the orders?

An empire?

Slaughter: Certainly not an empire! [laughs] And not at this point.

Gelvin: Invasion and occupation is a failure of American policy. If we can do it by having collaborators in other places, if we can do it by getting people to sign on to treaties, by getting people to set up free trade zones, then this is a success for the United States.

Richard Betts: But that's still different from real empire which means one country subjugating and exploiting another, which was much more the way the world was organized before the middle of the twentieth century.

Mark Jacobson: We know our vital national security interests include supporting our allies but we also know that vital national security interests include countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

VO: Everyone expected Washington to strike, and strike hard. But instead there was...Inaction. Confusion. Reflection. Considerations. Investigations.

Assad was not intimidated. He struck back. His weapon of choice, a TV talk show.

"Charlie Rose"

Assad (Charlie Rose interview): "Obama can draw lines for himself and for his country, not for other countries. We have our red lines, like our sovereignty, and our independence. Why did the United States fail in most of its wars? Because it always based its wars on the wrong information."

VO: War seemed more inevitable than ever.

John Stewart: "Remind us again why we have to do this...Oh right, we have to bomb Syria because we're in 7th grade!"

VO: But then, like a deus ex machina a god coming down on stage to fix things, Vladimir Putin appeared.

CBS: "On Monday the President suggested he might support a plan that would require Syria to surrender its chemical weapons stockpile."

Alan West: "You know Vladimir Putin has pretty much played President Obama - if I can use an old southern term - like a broken banjo."

Guiliani: "They've been completely incomprehensible."

David Ignatius (audio only): "Diplomacy has been going on for nearly two years and finally came to fruition this week in what seemed a series of accidents but in fact were not."

VO: The deal got Obama off the hook. (*Obama: Thanks very much.*) Chemical weapons off the battlefield. Let Russia act like a world power. It was a win, win, win. But what about the tens of thousands of Syrians who would continue to die in a civil war. If Assad stays, so do the secret police and the torture. If he goes, what follows, chaos? Who is responsible? Who is supposed to act? Is it up to world's sole superpower? What are the consequences if the United States acts? What are the consequences if it doesn't?

Marwan Bishara: Joining us from New York on this episode are Edward Luttwak, Andrew Bacevich, Hamid Dabashi, Karen Greenberg, and Phyllis Bennis. But first I dropped by the Washington DC offices of the consulting firm Rice Hadley Group to talk to Steve Hadley, the former National Security Adviser to President George W. Bush. I started by asking him what interests the US has in Syria.

Stephen Hadley: The United States really has four interests in, at least four interests in what's going on in Syria. One is to insure that there is no repetition, I would say this, to give imposed consequences for the chemical use that Syria's already done, and make sure there's no repetition of it. But we also have an interest in bringing to the end a war that has been a humanitarian disaster for the Syrian people. A war that is increasingly sectarian and is spreading beyond its borders and risk destabilizing Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. And a war that is facilitating al-Qaeda, building a safe haven in northern Syria from which it can threaten not only Syrians, but the region and the United States. And then finally of course, this is an effort by Iran to, through Hezbollah, to extend its hegemony. Those are all important US interests, and I would have liked to see a strategy by the administration that would have used a strike to advance and, all of those interests.

Bishara: But I, one could argue that a stronger strike would actually do exactly the contrary on all these four points you mentioned.

Hadley: That's already happening, and if we do nothing, that's exactly what will happen. More people will die, it'll be more sectarian, we'll open the door more for al-Qaeda, and it's pretty clear that Assad is already, during the week of the negotiations, had doubled down. So those are the things that happen if we don't do something. What could have happened if we had done a strike was something that would not only enforce the prohibition of chemical weapons, but would have set back Assad militarily, would have sent the message that this man is not going to win this war. And that I think, followed by training and arming of the opposition, would have leveled the playing field a bit on the ground in Syria, and would have opened the door for a negotiated outcome.

Bishara: It's been going on for two years, a hundred thousand people died. None of that really happened. I mean there was some symbolic support for the opposition, but nothing really serious. And now what you're advocating, that your detractors say was something more, be more of a lethal attack that could lead to a major chaos within the country in the absence of that support to the opposition.

Hadley: Well I, as I say, I would have had an attack, it would still have been limited. It was an effort to deal a setback to the Assad regime, and I would have coupled it with some training and arming of the opposition.

Bishara: But have we learned the ultimate lesson, which is that force, military force does not resolve political problems, and certainly does not resolve sectarian issues. It was after the, after the power was, military power was used with such, with such magnitude that we've seen Iraq explode. Aren't you afraid that the same will get worse in Syria as it did in Iraq?

Hadley: It's getting worse in Syria precisely because we're doing nothing. And secondly I would -

Bishara: But how does military force resolve it?

Hadley: I think the lesson we learned, and people are drawing that the reason, many people are saying that the reason there is an agreement on chemical weapons in Syria today is precisely because the diplomacy was backed by the threat of military force.

Bishara: You don't think the limit of American military force is a lesson to be learned, in your last decade or two policy in the Middle East?

Hadley: No. I think the military piece of what we did in Iraq succeeded. We found a military strategy that did bring down and largely end the sectarian war and did largely eliminate al-Qaeda as -

Bishara: But it started the sectarian war. In 2003, there was no sectarian war in Iraq.

Hadley: No, my point is that we, what would happen in the aftermath of 2003 was a sectarian war, no question about that. And the challenge -

Bishara: Thanks to the use of power, thanks to the war.

Hadley: Thanks to the use of power and also thanks to decades of what the rule of Saddam Hussein did to the Iraqi people. What we learned was, military power could topple a regime. Military power was not enough to reconstruct a society that had suffered from three decades of abuse by Saddam and a war and the lesson we learned, unfortunately, too well, was watch out for the sins of commission, watch out for using military power when you don't have a plan. But what we're learning in Syria is there are also sins of omission, of omission. And if you fail to deal with some of these situations it can have the kinds of disastrous consequences we're seeing today.

Bishara: You don't think that there's a schism now between America and Washington? Between what the American people feel and think about their future and their role in the world, and that of how most of you folks, the influential ones in Washington think about what America needs to do?

Hadley: I think one of the things that various people have said, and I think it's right, is there is a strain of isolationism in America today. We've seen it before in our history. In this case it's both on the extreme right and the extreme left coming together, and you see that.

Bishara: Isolationism or realism?

Hadley: You see that coming together.

Bishara: It's not realism? People realize about that, the limits of their power and how it should be thrown around in the world?

Hadley: Well I don't think America throws around its power. I think it tries to use its power to achieve objectives that are good for the United States and good for the world. I think that we have had these periods of isolationism in the past. They usually come after there's been a war that has ended inconclusively. The question is whether it's a good thing for American interests and a good thing for the world. And there are a lot of people who are writing and saying publicly that America's reluctance to play a role internationally is a mistake, and it is bad for the rest of the world. But at the end of the day --

Bishara: It's a minority view.

Hadley: You're in the media, you can poll it and you can see. And the question will be historically which view turns out to be right. But I think the one thing you can, we can both agree on, is that should America use its power it needs to be done for the right reasons and it needs to be done as effectively as, as can be, and in a limited way that achieves those interests. And that's of course what American policymakers try to achieve, and that's what the American people want to see.

Marwan Bishara (VO): To discuss America's policy towards Syria and beyond, we're joined by Karen Greenberg, director of the Center of National Security at Fordham University School of Law and Phyllis Bennis, director of The New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies and author of *Challenging Empire: How People, Governments, and the UN Defy US Power*.

Bishara: Phyllis, Karen, welcome to *Empire*.

So Karen, I was pretty taken by how Hadley has been dismissive of the idea that there is an American public that doesn't want to go to war. That doesn't like the idea of another Iraq. Is he right about that? Is it just a question of isolationism?

Greenberg: No, I think there has been a growing and somewhat surprising, given our past, American opposition in Congress, among the populace, to another war. It's been ten or twelve years of war depending on how you count it and it has depleted American resources. It hasn't gotten us any gains.

We know now that in a limited war, whatever that is, the American people know that there is no such thing as a limited war, that we don't have control over it, that we have no idea what will happen to the society and to the world at large.

Bishara: So this is new, this is not just an old isolationist streak in the American public.

Greenberg: This is a learning curve, this is a learning curve. You can tell us once, 'We know what we're doing.' You can tell us twice, 'We can target something, we have a strategy, we know what the end is going to be.' We don't have an end game, we don't have an exit strategy that we've seen work in a way that has brought peace, and a lack of sectarian violence.

Bishara: Phyllis, there's this schism between Washington and the rest of the country. This idea that the rest of the country no longer trusts Washington even if they say it's the little-ist, little-ist attack on Syria, it's going to be safe, there aren't going to be boots on the ground. They just don't trust them.

Bennis: No, people didn't believe that. But it was also — I think this notion of a learning curve is very important — I think what we saw here was an administration that was prepared to go to war in violation of international law, prepared to go to war without the United Nations, prepared to go to without NATO, prepared to go without the Arab League. But they weren't prepared to go without the Brits, without somebody to give them some kind of political cover. And when the British parliament said, 'No, we're not doing this again,' that changed everything.

Bishara: So it was British public, not the American public.

Bennis: It was first the British public and then it was the American public. It was the British public that led to the presidential decision to go to Congress; it was the American public that forced Congress to be so clear they were going to say 'No,' that the president pulled back when he got the opportunity with Putin to say, 'Uh, there's a better way to do this.'

Bishara: So what's the idea that you can go to war without Congress, without the American people—what is that, imperial presidency?

Bennis: This is the old imperial presidency, this is left over from the Bush administration, you know this notion — and we heard it again in President Obama's speech at the General Assembly when he said, 'I know some of you won't like it, but I'm going to claim American exceptionalism. And it was based on this idea of the legality, the reality, and the power that the US has to go to war based on 'that's how we decide we're going to do something or not.' It's the Bush notion as we saw after 9-11 that you either let them get away with it or you go to war. There's no other alternatives, and what we did this time was to pose alternatives for people.

Bishara: Phyllis you, unlike Hadley and Obama —

Bennis: Thank you, thank you.

Bishara: — Hadley and Obama which is kind of, there is a complementarity between the two which is a bit troubling

Bennis: Power does that, power does that

Bishara: So he says, or they say, it's legitimate, moral and pretty safe. You claim it is illegal, immoral and dangerous.

Bennis: Right. In all those ways. It's illegal because whatever they say about the rights of the sole superpower, there are only two basic reasons.

Bishara: But if it is illegal, is it legitimate, as in the case of Bosnia and Kosovo?

Bennis: It's not legitimate if it's not going to actually work. If it's not going to reduce the number of casualties rather than raise them. I mean this notion that somehow Kosovo was legitimate.

Bishara: But what Hadley talks about is leveling the fighting field.

Bennis: Yeah, so that they can kill each other. This was the old line, and this is the current Israeli line about: 'We want both sides to continue fighting. We want them to continue killing each other.'

Bishara: But then they decided last minute, as we were speaking just earlier, because of the British, Obama felt that he was boxed in

Bennis: So he wanted Congress to share it with him. Then Congress got boxed in by the American opposition.

Bishara: Exactly

Bennis: the public opposition.

Bishara: And the savior was Putin.

Bennis: Right on the political side. But I think that we have to go back to the basics that it was illegal, it would have been immoral because it would have created more casualties as all the military leaders said. It would not have stopped the war, it would not have prevented any use of chemical weapons by anyone — we still don't know for sure who used them. And it would have been dangerous, because as much as the war in Syria is now already — it's spread into at least five separate wars that are being waged to the last Syrian — that would have been spreading even further if the US had gone in directly with a direct military intervention.

Bishara: Karen.

Greenberg: The idea that there would be no boots on the ground, which is what is said over and over, is not something that many in the military have embraced as a reality. We all know, whether it's special forces, whether it's training forces.

Bennis: The first pilot that gets shot down is going to be rescued.

Greenberg: Hadley refers to the fact that we'd have to train after this. Who is going to train? That is boots on the ground. And once you are in, what we have learnt from our wars is, we don't know how to get out in a way that's easy.

Bishara: But you have worked a lot on the whole idea of drones and the likes and so on and so forth. Don't you think the whole idea of launching a strike through cruise, which means you really are at a distance from all of it, you just beat them up and leave.

Bennis: You are not at a distance. You are on ships that are right off the coast of Syria. This notion that somehow we are safe, we just going to send those missiles over there, somehow, over there. It's ridiculous.

Bishara: And what happens when then they don't accept it, they are not deterred.

Bennis: What we don't see in Congress, or in the White House, or anywhere else in the mainstream press, we don't see a discussion of what happens the day after.

Greenberg: Yeah, I want to talk about the drone thing a little bit. I think what may have happened inside the Obama administration was that they saw the drone program pretty easily. We are going to have limited, targeted strikes, we know what we are doing, and in a way, I think this gave them the confidence to say, to use the same terminology, 'We are going to have a limited, strategic strike.' But this is not a drone strike. This is a military engagement. And it didn't work. I think the second thing, and this brings Putin to the table, is the lack of diplomacy in the Bush administration, their lack of respect for what diplomacy could accomplish, is very much, we are beginning to see this now. Putin comes out and says, let's try for the diplomatic option. That's what's on the table now, that's what Americans seem to be supporting. It's not just an opposition that's isolationism.

Bennis: As we see with Iran, which we had not seen at all, the willingness to talk with Iran.

Bishara: Engage.

Bennis: To engage in a serious way, to recognize, and this was interesting I think in President Obama's speech, as much as he did talk about the American exceptionalism and the right to use military force on the particular question of Iran, he was very respectful of Iranian interests, which they've never been before. He recognized that Iran sees the US as the country that carried out this coup in 1953 that led to the overthrow of a democratically elected President and the imposition of the Shah, and acknowledging that, I think was a very important statement about when you are going to negotiate, you need to have everybody at the table. But you also need to recognize that the other side has legitimate interests.

Bishara: Phyllis, Karen, thanks for joining *Empire*. We need to take a news break. And when we come back...

Obama: "I believe America is exceptional – in part because we have shown a willingness, through the sacrifice of blood and treasure, to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all."

*****PACKAGE 2*****

Obama: "I believe America is exceptional – in part because we have shown a willingness, through the sacrifice of blood and treasure, to stand up not only for our own narrow self-interests, but for the interests of all."

VO: This time--

Obama: "I have a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions."

VO: Did this mean that there are contradictory impulses in the American soul -- to rule, or at least control the world?

Reagan: "Mr. Gorbachev teared down this wall."

VO: Or to tend its own garden and let everyone find their own way? Is America a reluctant empire?

Al Pacino (The Godfather): "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!"

VO: Or, was this just a swing of the pendulum, from hubris to modesty in search of the practical balance point between sins of commission and sins of omission.

Betts: What some of the long bloody messes in Iraq and Afghanistan have done over the past dozen years is to turn American opinion in a more skeptical direction.

Gelvin: You get the liberal interventionists, people who think that the United States can change things for humanitarian reasons or for whatever reasons. Neocons who have been very, very quick to reach for a gun, anti-interventionists, liberals, libertarians, who are just out and out isolationists.

VO: The first argument that America is not an empire is that it doesn't seize territory.

Colin Powell: "When America came home from these wars we never asked for any land, we never asked for sovereignty over any other country, the only thing we only asked for was enough land to bury our dead."

VO: The other argument is that Americans are just too nice to be real imperialists. Americans thought it was their manifest destiny to "overspread and to possess the whole of the continent

which Providence has given” them. Expansion didn’t stop at the water’s edge. It was a “splendid little war.” And profitable, too.

Gelvin: With the advent of the modern period the nature of empires changed.

VO: By the middle of the 20th Century, the United States had stopped acquiring territory. But it kept acquiring power.

Betts: The United States is the only superpower in the world, it exerts influence in the world and the United States has been the dominant force, the leader, supplying the principle sorts of security guarantees, dominating economic rules of the game and so on.

Kilcullen: It has not only interests but also obligations to the international community.

Rami Khouri: It’s an empire of the mind, and it’s an empire of militarism, and it’s an empire of mannerisms. It wants people in the world to behave like it behaves.

VO: Still, many would deny that the United States is an empire because of its ideals. That it only fights to bring freedom and democracy to the world.

George W. Bush: “Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly.”

George H. W. Bush: “Only did this as a last resort.”

Richard Drayton: Imperialism was the sudden acquisition by Europe of the new forms of power that came from industrial production, which led to the weapons revolution in the 19th century, and the capacity to apply massive force at a distance.

I would suggest that what underlies the increased appetite to intervene abroad is the acquisition of new forms of power.

Marwan Bishara (VO): To discuss war, diplomacy, and America’s role as a global power, we’re joined in New York by Andrew Bacevich, a Professor of International Relations and History at Boston University and author of several books, including his most recent *Breach of Trust, How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*. Edward Luttwak, a military strategist and historian, and author of several books including *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* and more recently, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. And last but not least, Hamid Dabashi, Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and author of more than twenty books, including his recent, *The Arab Spring* and *Being A Muslim in The World*.

Bishara: Andrew Bacevich, Hamid Dabashi, Edward Luttwak, welcome to EMPIRE.

These have been two eventful, short decades, where America was involved in the Middle East and elsewhere militarily. Andrew, where do you place Syria? Between Rwanda there was no intervention and Iraq there was incredible intervention. Somalia, and Kosovo. How do you see Syria in the American strategy?

Andrew Bacevich: Well, there is no American strategy with regard to the Middle East, and there hasn’t been for at least a decade. There have been a series of ongoing crises, and the United States has responded to these crises in one way or another, believing that military power is somehow going to make a difference. I’ve really come to believe that Washington’s main problem is it’s unwillingness to acknowledge that American power really is irrelevant to the events ongoing

in the Middle East. And the notion that the United States can control it, direct it, shape it, lead it to some particular outcome, is utterly absurd, and yet people in Washington cannot acknowledge that absurdity.

Bishara: But do you think that there would be fear of accusation of neglecting Syria like Rwanda was neglected, or perhaps maybe they should interfere like they interfered in Libya, where apparently the damage was minimal.

Bacevich: We cannot acknowledge that we are a normal nation. We cannot acknowledge that we are a nation shaped by history rather than shaping history. And again when an event like Syria erupts, those who believe in the American mission and American uniqueness, see Syria as an opportunity to demonstrate how special we are.

Bishara: So you think there should be no intervention in Syria?

Hamid Dabashi: Americans as you well know have been intervening in Syria. CIA has been on the ground. They have been arming various groups. Israelis are intervening, Iranians are intervening. Russians, etc. It's a proxy war already. So suddenly hoopla after the most recent gassing of civilians, whether or not should the US intervene, it's a red herring, it's just a nonsensical question.

Edward Luttwak: In order for the United States not to intervene, the United States has to now progress to a new status, the new status is that we have to issue one of our doctrines, like the Monroe Doctrine, one of those things, and say that the armed forces of the United States shall not be employed in any area but for the immediate protection of American citizens who are facing immediate peril, or something like that. Otherwise there's a presumption of intervention.

Bishara: So how about then demilitarizing in order to make sure not everything looks like a nail in the region.

Luttwak: Well that would be something that would actually be worth discussing.

Bishara: The point of Russia, the point about making the deal with Russia, you think that is an opening for perhaps a new type of global relationship regarding the United States, or you think this is just a fleeting moment?

Bacevich: Well my argument would be that the Russians have resented, they've resented, they resented the way the Cold War ended. They resented, from their perception, the advantage we took of their weakness for example expanding NATO eastward. And so Putin's been looking for an opportunity to poke us back in the eye.

Bishara: But the decision to go to the Russians, or to agree, and then before that to go to Congress. Do you see a reluctant leadership, a reluctant superpower?

Luttwak: Absolutely. You have a reluctant President. Because President Obama has allowed a lot of enthusiasts and interventionists to remain in his staff, and he has the secretary of state who we've all discussed is an enthusiast himself. He himself is not, and therefore he had a series of retreats. Two years ago his retreat was, If they don't use nerve gas, or sorry, Don't use chemical weapons.

Bishara: The red line.

Luttwak: Yeah. The red line was a way of not intervening.

Bishara: It was a red line for him.

Luttwak: Correct. And then going to congress which was a desperate move because he asked Congress to vote in a way he himself would never have voted if he was still a Senator. In this moment the Russians --

Bishara: Is this a reluctant Obama or is this a reluctant power?

Luttwak: First of all it's a reluctant president but his reluctance does not, is not a misrepresentation of, if you look, public opinion polls. Public opinion polls are ambivalent but definably on the side, sixty percent let's say more or less anti-intervention.

Dabashi: Marwan I don't, in fact the word reluctance I don't think is an appropriate word. This is liberal imperialism. They operate with soft power, with covert operations, with proxy wars, with special operations, economic sanctions, drone attacks. This is a different warfare. In fact statistically Obama's use of drones is drastically more than Bush's use of drones. It's a different mode of military operations.

Luttwak: The fact is that Russia, [inaudible word] Russia, Mr. Putin was facing the fact that the Americans were going to bomb his only ally, and that he had no instrument, direct instrument to defend Assad or to answer the Americans or deter them or dissuade them. And then he comes forward with what I consider a brilliant offer, right? And Obama embraces it with two hands as any intelligent person should have done. And this may lead to some additional cooperation of Iran, notably. Because the idea of Americans and Russians going together to identify, locate, remove, and destroy equipment --

Bishara: Do you think this is more effective than a military strike?

Luttwak: Excuse me a second. It's a hundred -- any military strike would have been such a disaster that virtually any known alternative would be better. In my view. We have all the reasons that have been explained. But for me I'm very pleased that the interventionist impasse, this unthinking, unreasoning, unstrategical intervention impulse was stopped by a variety of things including Putin's offer.

Bishara: Well we agree about that then.

Luttwak: I'm just grateful for that.

Bishara: Let's move on to disagree about another point. In your last book Andrew, you speak about how war has become easier once this is becoming a professional army. It became what you call Washington's army. It was less accountable to the rest of the country if you will. And certainly with the new technology that Hamid talks about, war has become easier. And if we look at the last twenty years, Syria was going to be just that one last example if it happened or if it happens. So what guarantees are there that America's drive for war is going to diminish?

Bacevich: I think there are no guarantees, and that's where I think one has to appreciate the standing, stature, influence of what we Americans call the national security state. I mean that apparatus in Washington, the bureaucracy that is deeply invested into the continuing militarization of US policy. There are people who are making money, there are people who's, who's stature in the government is dependent upon continuing down this path. So let's take for example on the Syria case. We have pretty clear indications that the senior military leadership didn't want to do it, didn't want to attack Syria, for all kinds of prudent reasons. It doesn't follow that the senior US military leadership is interested in reducing the size of the Pentagon's budget, or of rethinking that distribution of bases all over the place that you cited a little go, a little while ago as potentially part of the problem. That, that's again why I am not yet persuaded that the non-intervention in Syria of the moment necessarily is suggestive of a decisive turn in events.

Dabashi: There is an infrastructure of militarization of the globe. Not only the globe, into, into the heavens. You know, into the space --

Bishara: And cyber and so on.

Dabashi: And cyberspace. ... And then President Eisenhower's sort of military industrial complex there is transmutation of the civic institutions of a democracy into the pegs of a military machinery. That has happened systematically ... That there is nothing evil about Bush or there is nothing any less violent about Obama. There is something has happened over the last fifty years.

Luttwak: The American nation is not a racial nation. They do not belong to a race called Americans. They're not a religious entity. They are an ideological entity. This is the first ideological state. The fact is that it is an ideological project. And right in the beginning, President Washington as he left office said, we have to decide whether our project of bringing liberty when it is our duty to also extend it. And the issue of course was Latin America which was then Spanish colonial territory. And right then there was a debate between Americans who wanted to bring the American ideals to the whole planet.

Bacevich: It is an ideological country. And the ideology, really the cornerstone of ideology is this notion of American exceptionalism. We're different, we're special, we're chosen. Everybody else wants to be like us. I'd argue that for a very considerable period of time, certainly through the 19th century and probably up to 1945, the ideology actually served the United States very well. It was a source of power and enabled us to expand power, to achieve great wealth. The problem really is --

Bishara: You mean invigorating, inspiring and so on so forth?

Bacevich: We are called upon to do this. Let's take California. The problem is in more recent years, in particular over the last decade, and in particular in the Middle East, this ideology no longer serves our purposes. But we, we are unable to distance ourselves from it. We are unable to simply read the facts.

Bishara: But I need the answer following that very particular point. Whether then at one point, or throughout, or none at all was America a benevolent empire then of sorts?

Luttwak: Yes.

Bacevich: No, of course not. Of course not. The purpose of empire is inherently selfish. It is about us. The purpose of statecraft is about us. And I would argue that for a very considerable period of time, partly, partly due to geographic considerations, the resources of North America, the weakness of our near adversaries, for a considerable period of time we were strategically the most successful country in, in the last two millennia. It's in recent years when we have failed to understand changing circumstances, limits on our power, limits on our ability to understand what's going on in the world, and we are unable to let loose of this ideology and behave pragmatically and realistically, not to save the world, but to serve the interests of the United States.

Bishara: Benevolent empire, Edward?

Luttwak: No, I believe that you have 1943, American troops landing in Italy, and the Italians seeing these Americans, their uniforms that were made of real wool, which then seemed, and these American soldiers giving out cans of corned beef and stuff like that. This was a certain America that was benevolent in its effects on the macro strategic scale, and benevolent in every manifestation. Applauded, embraced, kissed on both cheeks and wonderfully well-liked.

There had been an ideology in Italy which was the fascist ideology. And before the American troops actually physically landed, that ideology was dead. In the case of the Middle East the terrain is occupied by rival ideology called Islam in its different manifestations. Not all of them are Muslim. Like [unintelligible] who call themselves Alawites are not Muslim as far as I know, but Muslim are, it's a rival ideology. And when you come in as an ideological power and you meet the rival ideology, either you destroy it or you stay out, because you cannot be. And that is the fundamental --

Bishara: But Edward, has America failed to resolve those questions in the Middle East because it's complex, or has America added to the problems in the Middle East, and put --

Dabashi: Added, added.

Luttwak: In Libya, in Libya we certainly have added to the problems.

Bishara: From Iraq for example onward, Iran onward.

Luttwak: No. I would say that most of, most of the interventions which have taken place, the '99 [inaud.] intervention in itself if we had been, if had been logically followed by next step of going home, going home, then would have been I think a successful thing.

Bacevich: It wasn't. It wasn't. We didn't go home, we didn't do what you wanted to do. It was a, it was a chapter on a narrative that has led to ever greater militarization.

Bishara: It was actually the beginning of military intervention. Modern military intervention.

Bacevich: It was a milestone, it wasn't the beginning of.

Bishara: Modern, modern.

Bacevich: No, no. Reagan in Lebanon, the famous Tanker War. We intervened in effect on the side of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Bishara: But do you think the intensity, do you think the intensity of intervention after the Cold War.

Bacevich: Yes, absolutely yes.

Luttwak: But that ended. The thing is that now --

Bishara: That ended? You know during the week of discussion on Syria there were bombings of Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

Luttwak: Of course.

Bishara: But these are acts of war.

Bacevich: How can you say of course? [Laughter]

Luttwak: A. They're, legally they're acts of war. But all three of them represent a retreat from the even much more ambitious idea of entering Yemen. At one point I actually was --

Bishara: Well you cannot enter all countries, Edward.

Luttwak: You will not believe this. You will not believe this, but only a few, maybe a year and a half ago, two years ago, I was in a room in Washington and practically blew up, exploded and, because the guy was saying the only solution is to go to Yemen and straighten up Yemen, you know? And he had this idea that we start economic programs, social programs, educational programs, we deal with the water problem in Yemen and all that stuff. So this is a retreat.

Bacevich: The fact that US military action under Obama occurs on a smaller scale, that we're no longer in the business of invading and occupying countries, does not equal any sort of retreat or demilitarization.

Bishara: Actually he could do more, he could do more of it in the future if it's going to be less costly, less boots on the ground.

Luttwak: No boots.

Bacevich: And no one notices.

Luttwak: Excuse me. [Crosstalk] There were three levels.

Bishara: But those at the receiving end of power don't care whether it's with boots or without boots.

Luttwak: Marwan, let us remember the stages. Stage one is we're going to change the entire country and its culture. We're going to go to Afghanistan and turn it into Sweden, okay?

Bacevich: We got your point, but the point is we're still waging war in these countries.

Luttwak: Okay. Excuse me.

Bishara: But I want to back to the point of legal or not legal. Because this is really important, not because I'm a legal scholar or expect anything of you. But when I heard Lindsey Graham, and I hope maybe we can end on this one, when I heard Senator Lindsey Graham say, I heard, I mean actually, when I heard Lindsey Graham saying, President Assad did not do what President Obama told him to do, [Laughter] hence that he deserves to be [inaud.], that approach to different, to other sovereign states, I mean international in that sense, the post second World War order in that sense did not come out of nothing. It did come out of a place of a logical sort whereby we do live in a world where there is sovereign units and these are called states, and you don't violate their sovereignty at will.

Dabashi: Which means nothing to this particular empire, Marwan. This is the empire that produced Paul Wolfowitz who went to national television and he said, we're going to end states. He used the term. This is Leo Straussian thinking, these are, megalomaniac --

Bishara: And what's the alternative to states then?

Dabashi: Pardon me? No, no, no. Well they think that they're the only empire that matters, whereas the point of this conversation right now is a nation. Sovereign nation, a state of 21 million. Six million of which are now dislocated. 2 million refugees outside of their countries, subject to a war criminal and a mass murderer named Bashar al-Assad, who needs to be put on a court of trial by his own people, by Syrians who are subject to his harassments. Nobody died and made United States anything. Going in it precisely does what you're suggesting, namely dismantling sovereignty of nation states, whether it's 21 million in Syria or 18 million in Egypt or anywhere else, and creating this megalomaniac, huge empire, to which only Obama is accountable. But if he could manage his own house here, three hundred million thirty five million under poverty line, fifty million under-insured. Public schools are dismantling, there is no public

health. If the entire world could become American so Obama could manage them, that would be a different story.

Bishara: Professor Dabashi, Professor Bacevich, Professor Luttwak, thank you for joining *Empire*.

***** Postscript *****

Marwan Bishara: We at *Empire* have struggled with this episode and disagreed on the nature of US power that dictates the use of force and about the political brain that produces the thinking behind the use of violence. I can't say after weeks of discussions we've arrived at the same answers, but we've certainly agreed about the relevant questions that beg for answers.

Then came Mr. Obama's UN speech that was pretty big on answers that invoke at least three more questions. One: Why is the American president the only world leader to speak from the UN podium of the use of military power that's not in self-defence and not mandated by the UN Security Council. Two: What does it say about US power that even the most liberal president, a constitutional lawyer, would use American force to reinforce international norms, guarantee the free flow of oil, respond to international terrorism and hit those who attack Washington's friends anywhere. And three, if that's not a self-designated world policeman, then what is it? Well to answer these questions and much more go to our new magnificent website and don't forget to follow us or write to us on Facebook and Twitter. Until next time.

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